



Lincoln's Moral Constitution

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I had an e-mail last spring from a colleague who picked up a copy of a pamphlet, printed under the auspices of the American Constitution Society, that featured in one handy format the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address. The ACS is, so to speak, the political progressives' alternative to the conservative Federalist Society. Even so, he was surprised to read through the text of the Gettysburg Address and feel that somehow, something was not quite right about it, since it read:

That we here highly resolve that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

After a moment of slightly confused reflection, he realized what was bothering him: the ACS version of the Gettysburg Address had omitted the key phrase, *under God*.¹ What Lincoln actually said here at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, was “that we here highly resolve that this nation, *under God*, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” (emphasis added). Being a fair-minded man, my colleague won-

¹Robert P. George, “God and Gettysburg,” *First Things* (September/October 2010), online at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/07/god-and-gettysburg>; Mark Bauerlein, “Lincoln, History, and Ideology,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 21, 2010), at <http://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/lincoln-historyideology/27073>.

Although Abraham Lincoln was not a member of a Christian church and apparently made no profession of anything like “orthodox” Christian faith, his opposition to slavery was driven by a profound sense of “natural law”—indeed, natural law “under God”—that made him see the Civil War not as a simplistic crusade but as proof that God’s purpose is “something different from the purpose of either party.” The War was, in fact, the judgment of God on both North and South for their complicity in slavery.

dered briefly if this was simply a glitch, so he asked me about the textual history of the address. After all, of the five copies of the address that survive in Lincoln's own hand, two of them also omit the phrase *under God*. But the two copies without *under God* were preliminary drafts of the address. The Associated Press reporter Joseph Gilbert, who took down Lincoln's words as he spoke them, the *Boston Advertiser* reporter Charles Hale, and the *Philadelphia Press* reporter John R. Young all included the phrase *under God*, as did the three versions of the address that Lincoln wrote out afterwards.² With that history in hand, it was hard for my friend to avoid the conclusion that the American Constitution Society's version had simply airbrushed *under God* out of the address as an inconvenience.

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Still, people really have wondered just how much Abraham Lincoln himself was *under God*, or what he meant when he said that this nation should consider itself *under God* as it strove for a new birth of freedom. After all, Lincoln has been the only president (along with Thomas Jefferson) never to have formally joined a church. There is no indication that he ever was baptized, ever took communion, or ever joined in public prayers. And this was not because he was ignorant of such obligations. He was raised in a particularly strict and devout family—his parents were members of a small Calvinistic Baptist sect—and certainly had enough of the Bible dinned into his head at an early age that in later years he could give most preachers fairly good competition at identifying scriptural citations. In 1846, a minister, passing by one of Lincoln's political meetings, gave Lincoln a little good-natured heckling, "and remarked that *Where the great ones are there will the people be*. Mr. Lincoln replied Ho! Parson, a little more Scriptural: *Where the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together!*"³ (Matt 24:28).

In 1864, when Lincoln was up for reelection and a dump-Lincoln movement had emerged within his own party around John Charles Fremont, Lincoln noticed that the reports of a pro-Fremont convention in Cleveland included a head count of about four hundred delegates. Lincoln picked up a Bible and unerringly went to the text in 1 Sam 22 that he thought best described the Fremont movement: "And every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that

²Frank L. Clement, "The Six Copies of the Gettysburg Address," in *The Gettysburg Soldiers' Cemetery and Lincoln's Address* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane, 1993) 153; Gabor Boritt, *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) 119, 143, 271; Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln's Gettysburg Declaration: "A New Birth of Freedom"* (Ft. Wayne: Lincoln National Life Foundation, 1964) 112, 164–165.

³Andrew Goodpasture, interview with William H. Herndon (March 31, 1869), in *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews and Statements about Abraham Lincoln*, ed. R. O. Davis and D. L. Wilson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998) 573.

was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them: and there were with him about four hundred men” (22:2 KJV).⁴

Knowing the Bible, however, is not the same thing as subscribing to it. Nathaniel Grigsby, whose brother married Lincoln’s sister while the Lincolns lived in Indiana, explained to Lincoln’s law partner William Henry Herndon that “I cannot tell you what his notions of the Bible were. He was a great talker on the scriptures and read it a great deal, and he talked about religion as other persons did, but I do not know his view on religion [because] he never made any profession while in Indiana that I know of.”⁵ Orville Hickman Browning, one of Lincoln’s closest political friends, recalled that, during the White House years, Lincoln frequently spent Sunday afternoons in the White House library reading the Bible; but, added Browning (himself a devout Presbyterian and Bible-reader), he “never knew of [Lincoln] engaging in any other act of devotion. He did not invoke a blessing at table, nor did he have family prayers. What private religious devotions may have been customary with him I do not know. I have no knowledge of any.”⁶ Even the Lincoln children’s babysitter in the White House, Julia Taft Bayne, remarked that Lincoln “read the Bible quite as much for its literary style as he did for its religious or spiritual content. He read it in the relaxed, almost lazy attitude of a man enjoying a good book.”⁷

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In fact, take Lincoln back into his young adult years as a store clerk in New Salem, Illinois, and as a beginning lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, in the 1830s, and Lincoln might not have seemed to think it even a “good book.” The young Lincoln bolted from his father’s farm and his father’s control as soon as he turned twenty-one, and once on his own, he rejected very nearly everything his father had stood for, including Christianity. John Todd Stuart, who was Lincoln’s mentor and first partner in practicing law, described the twenty-something Lincoln as “an avowed and open infidel” who “sometimes bordered on atheism. Lincoln went further against Christian beliefs and doctrines and principles than any man I ever heard.” Stuart was “shocked” to hear Lincoln hold forth on “the inherent defects, so-called, of the Bible” and deny “that Jesus was the son of God as understood and maintained by the Christian world.”⁸ Lincoln’s unbelief was known broadly enough that in 1847, when he ran for Congress, his opponent—a

⁴David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995) 503.

⁵Nathaniel Grigsby to William H. Herndon (January 21, 1866), in Davis and Wilson, *Herndon’s Informants*, 169.

⁶Browning, in *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay’s Interviews and Essays*, ed. Michael Burlingame (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996) 130.

⁷Julia Taft Bayne, *Tad Lincoln’s Father* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1931) 183–184.

⁸Stuart, interview with William H. Herndon (March 2, 1870), in Davis and Wilson, *Herndon’s Informants*, 576.

circuit-riding Methodist preacher, Peter Cartwright—fanned up popular unease in the Illinois 7th Congressional district about an unbelieving candidate to the point where Lincoln had to issue a public statement, admitting “That I am not a member of any Christian Church,” but denying that he was “an open scoffer at Christianity.”⁹

Maybe not an *open* scoffer, but certainly a private one: James Matheny, who stood up as the best man at Lincoln’s wedding in 1842, remembered that Lincoln “used to talk Infidelity in the Clerk’s office [in Springfield, where Matheny was the deputy clerk of the Illinois Supreme Court] about the years 1837–40” and “ridiculed the Bible & New Testament.”¹⁰ It was also no secret that he was not only not a member “of any Christian Church,” but rarely darkened any of their doorsteps. One irritated Springfield Presbyterian wrote that Lincoln usually spent Sunday mornings at “the railroad shop and spends the sabbath in reading Newspapers, and telling stories to the workmen.”¹¹ Not, we might say, the kind of man who would be eager to put his nation *under God*.

LINCOLN AS RELIGIOUS SEEKER?

And yet, Lincoln’s unbelief was more in the nature of a reaction than a conviction; he might have the natural-born debater’s pleasure at rocking the boats of the pious, but he spoke of his own lack of religion with regret rather than boasting. He was sufficiently alienated from his father, Thomas, that when the old man lay dying in 1851, Lincoln refused a summons to his father’s bedside; but he did not mock the consolation that his father’s religion held out. “Tell him,” Lincoln wrote to his stepbrother, that “our great, and good, and merciful Maker...will not turn away from him in any extremity. He notes the fall of a sparrow, and numbers the hairs of our heads; and He will not forget the dying man, who puts his trust in Him.”¹² When Parthena Hill, the wife of one of Lincoln’s business associates in New Salem, accosted him and asked, “Do you really believe there isn’t any future state?” Lincoln’s reply was almost regretful: “Mrs. Hill, I’m afraid there isn’t. It isn’t a pleasant thing to think that when we die that is the last of us.”¹³

In midlife Lincoln was even willing to speak of himself as a sort of religious seeker—a seeker who had not yet found, and was not convinced he would find, anything. “Probably it is to be my lot to go on in a twilight, feeling and reasoning my way through life, as questioning, doubting Thomas did,” he told Aminda Rogers Rankin. “But in my poor maimed, withered way, I bear with me, as I go on, a

⁹Abraham Lincoln, “Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity” (July 31, 1846), in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 8 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953) 1:382.

¹⁰Matheny, interview with William H. Herndon (March 2, 1870), in Davis and Wilson, *Herndon’s Informants*, 576.

¹¹Rev’d G. W. Pendleton (October 1, 1860), in Burlingame, *An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln*, 155.

¹²Lincoln, “To John D. Johnston” (January 12, 1851), in *Collected Works*, 2:97.

¹³Hill, in Walter B. Stevens, *A Reporter’s Lincoln*, ed. Michael Burlingame (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998) 12.

seeking spirit of desire for a faith that was with him of the olden time, who, in his need, as I in mine, exclaimed: ‘Help thou my unbelief.’”¹⁴

Whether this was a true confession, or simply a generous way of throwing an annoying inquirer off the scent, is something we are likely never to know. Lincoln was not a man given to much self-revelation. Judge David Davis, who presided over the courts on the Illinois 8th Judicial Circuit, where Lincoln practiced, told Herndon that “The idea that Lincoln talked” to anyone “about his religion or religious views is absurd to me. I knew the man so well: he was the most reticent, secretive man I ever saw, or expect to see.”¹⁵ What was not up for question, however, was Lincoln’s reputation for strictly honest and aboveboard dealings with people. The same Springfield clergyman who complained about Lincoln’s Sunday habits also conceded that although Lincoln “makes no pretensions to piety, he is probably as moral as most persons who discard religion entirely in their practice.” Among his fellow lawyers, “Mr. Lincoln’s character for professional honor stood very

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high.” The entire “framework of his mental and moral being was honesty,” Herndon remembered, “open, candid and square in his profession, never practicing on the sharp or low.” In the office, Herndon watched him warn clients with shaky cases, “You are in the wrong of the case and I would advise you to compromise, or if you cannot do that, do not bring a suit on the facts of your case because you are in the wrong and will surely [be] defeated and have to pay a big bill of costs.”¹⁶ This was true in more than matters of simple truth telling, too. David Davis remembered that “Lincoln was a Man of strong passion for women,” and this was a dangerous attribute in a man who had to deal with many issues that left women standing alone before the law. But “his Conscience kept him from seduction,” added Davis, and “this saved many, many a woman.” Lincoln might not subscribe to “Church Creeds,” said Leonard Swett (another fellow lawyer and another faithful Presbyterian layman), but he certainly “believed in the great laws of truth, the rigid discharge of duty, his accountability to God, the ultimate triumph of right, and the overthrow of wrong.”¹⁷

It may be difficult to imagine exactly how someone could believe in “the great

¹⁴Rankin, in *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Don E. and Virginia Fehrenbacher (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 373.

¹⁵Davis, interview with William H. Herndon (September 20, 1866), in Davis and Wilson, *Herndon’s Informants*, 348.

¹⁶J. Henry Shaw, in Emanuel Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln, From the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon* (New York: Viking, 1938) 305.

¹⁷Davis, interview with William H. Herndon (September 20, 1866), and Swett to Herndon (January 17, 1866), in Davis and Wilson, *Herndon’s Informants*, 168, 350.

laws of truth” while having no certainty in the existence or person of a divine Truth-giver. But law exists in the very fabric of nature whether or not we believe in the author of that law, just as it exists on the turnpike whether or not we believe that there are state troopers lurking behind the overpass; even Thomas Jefferson, no great stickler for orthodox Christianity, built his whole political theory around the assumption that “Nature’s God” had endowed every human being with “certain inalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Lincoln, likewise, might be filled with doubt about the intricacies of the “creeds” of Christian churches, but not about the existence of a fundamental natural law that everyone could understand.

Appealing to this underlying natural law, and the natural rights it equipped everyone with, was a particularly important aspect of Lincoln’s opposition to slavery. “I am naturally anti-slavery,” Lincoln said in 1864. “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel.”¹⁸ Opposition to slavery came so immediately to Lincoln because slavery was, very simply, “a gross outrage on the law of nature.” It trampled upon one of the great natural rights—the right to liberty—that Jefferson had spelled out in the Declaration of Independence, and *that* explained why a loathing for slavery amounted to human instinct: “Have not all civilized nations, our own among them, made the Slave trade capital, and classed it with piracy and murder?” Lincoln demanded. “Is it not held to be the great wrong of the world?”¹⁹ And not only *human* instinct:

The ant, who has toiled and dragged a crumb to his nest, will furiously defend the fruit of his labor, against whatever robber assails him. So plain, that the most dumb and stupid slave that ever toiled for a master, does constantly know that he is wronged. So plain that no one, high or low, ever does mistake it, except in a plainly selfish way; for although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, by being a slave himself.²⁰

SLAVERY AND NATURAL LAW

Still, like divinely revealed law, it was always possible for people to stop up their ears and refuse to hear what natural law was saying. And that was especially true when the voice of self-interest was chattering in their ears, and telling them that slavery might not be what they wanted for themselves, but was perfectly suitable for inflicting on someone else. Lincoln attacked the Old School Presbyterian minister Frederick Augustus Ross in 1858, after reading Ross’s *Slavery Ordained of God*, by asking whether self-interest hadn’t gotten the better of Ross’s understanding of both Scripture and natural law:

If he decides that God wills Sambo to continue a slave, he thereby retains his

¹⁸Lincoln, “To Albert G. Hodges” (April 4, 1864), in *Collected Works*, 7:281.

¹⁹Lincoln, “Speech at Springfield, Illinois” (October 4, 1854), in *Collected Works*, 2:245.

²⁰Lincoln, “Fragment on Slavery” (July 1, 1854), in *Collected Works*, 2:222.

own comfortable position; but if he decides that God wills Sambo to be free, he thereby has to walk out of the shade, throw off his gloves, and delve for his own bread. Will Dr. Ross be actuated by that perfect impartiality, which has ever been considered most favorable to correct decisions?²¹

One of the principal reasons Lincoln thought slavery was “a great & crying injustice, an enormous national crime and that we could not expect to escape punishment” for it, was the way it appealed to the selfishness of “thoughtless and giddy headed young men who looked upon work as vulgar and ungentlemanly.”²²

It did not surprise Lincoln, then, that slavery’s defenders retaliated by denying the existence of any such natural right to liberty, or denied that it applied to black people, or denied that natural law had more authority than raw majority rule. No one, Lincoln insisted, had more reverence for majority rule, for popular democracy, and for “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” But democracy was a means, not an end in itself. And the rule of democratic majorities, which was the essence of democracy, did not have the power to revoke or ignore natural law or natural rights. The proper sphere of democracy was in civil rights—in determining the civil privileges that the members of a community should enjoy, like voting. No majority, however, could ever be right in trying to veto someone’s natural right to liberty—unless, of course, they believed that there was no natural law in the first place, and that all power emerged from whatever a majority at a given moment wanted to do.

But this was exactly what the defense of slavery became. In the hands of pro-slavery radicals like John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, Jefferson and the Declaration were a colossal mistake. “All men are not created equal,” Calhoun announced. “Instead, then, of all men having the same right to liberty and equality,” liberty and equality are merely social conventions to be handed out as “high prizes” to certain races “in their most perfect state.”²³ But even comparatively moderate politicians like Lincoln’s old nemesis, Stephen A. Douglas, also denied that natural law had any authority over the will of a majority, and if that majority wanted to enslave blacks, then so be it. Democracy “leaves the people to do just as they please, and to shape their institutions according to what they may conceive to be their interests both for the present and the future.” Any state in the Union whose voters wanted a “slave-State constitution” must have “a right to it. It is none of my business which way the slavery clause is decided. I care not whether it is voted down or voted up.”²⁴

Lincoln thought this was not only absurd, but dangerous. Mere majority rule

²¹Lincoln, “Fragment on Pro-slavery Theology” (October 1, 1858), in *Collected Works*, 3:204.

²²Joseph Gillespie to William H. Herndon (January 31, 1866), in Davis and Wilson, *Herndon’s Informants*, 183.

²³Calhoun, “Speech on the Oregon Bill,” in *Union and Liberty: The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun*, ed. R. M. Lence (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992) 566, 568–569.

²⁴Douglas, “Speech in the Senate on the Lecompton Constitution” (March 22, 1857), in Clark E. Carr, *Stephen A. Douglas: His Life, Public Services, Speeches and Patriotism* (Chicago, 1909) 231; Douglas, “The President’s Message,” *Congressional Globe* (December 9, 1857), 35th Congress, first session, 18.

cannot reverse natural law, natural rights, or natural institutions. In fact, it was the underlying substructure of natural rights that ensured that democracy would not go off the rails and spin into some self-destructive abyss. Trying to override the natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness of other people purely by majority will would leave *you* unprotected when the majority turned its unrestricted powers on *you*. “Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, every where,” and not just as some local statute that can be sent up or sent down by the next referendum.

Destroy this spirit [Lincoln warned] and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors. Familiarize yourselves with the chains of bondage, and you are preparing your own limbs to wear them. Accustomed to trample on the rights of those around you, you have lost the genius of your own independence, and become the fit subjects of the first cunning tyrant who rises.²⁵

*mere majority rule cannot reverse natural law,
natural rights, or natural institutions*

This was not necessarily a religious argument. It might make the United States a nation *under natural law*, but not exactly *under God*. And in the years between 1854 and 1860, as Lincoln gradually attracted national political attention, his references to God are sparse, and coldly conventional when they do occur. Still, any appeal to natural law had religious overtones, since the existence of natural law implies a natural Law-giver, and even Jefferson felt compelled to frame his appeal to natural rights as the gift of “Nature’s God.” Lincoln did as much when he defined the “spirit which prizes liberty” as a natural “love of liberty which God”—*God*, and not just natural law—“has planted in our bosoms.” And it has to be said, too, that the defenders of slavery interpreted Lincoln’s natural-law argument as little better than covert religion. Stephen Douglas understood very well that “stopping to inquire into the sinfulness of slavery” makes it “a religious question.” But as far as Douglas was concerned, that was precisely why appeals to natural law should be allowed no bearing whatsoever on the politics of slavery. The separation of church and state ruled out-of-bounds anything that looked like a religious argument in public life, even if all reference to *God* had been safely transmuted into that of *Nature’s God*. Religion, Douglas insisted, is “intended to operate on our consciences, and insure the performance of our duties as individuals and Christians.” But it has nothing to say about “the form of government under which we live, and the character of our political civil institutions.”²⁶

²⁵Lincoln, “Speech at Edwardsville, Illinois” (September 11, 1858), in *Collected Works*, 3:94.

²⁶Douglas, “To the Democratic Republicans of Illinois” (November 1837), “To Francis B. Cutting et al.” (May 3, 1851), and “To Twenty-five Chicago Clergymen” (April 6, 1854), in *Letters of Stephen A. Douglas*, ed. Robert W. Johannsen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961) 42–43, 49, 216, 313.

THE CIVIL WAR AND GOD'S PURPOSE

What did, however, shift the ground decisively under Lincoln's feet, and move him from natural law to *under God*, was the experience of the Civil War. Like many a secular-minded optimist in the middle of the nineteenth century, Lincoln had a sublime confidence in the power of progress. But progress is precisely what the first eighteen months of the Civil War offered no evidence of: slavery, which ought to have been headed for the dustbin of history, had shown itself resourceful in wooing sympathy and aid from Britain and France, and the Rebel armies had been victorious on one battlefield after another. By September of 1862, the main Rebel army, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, had actually gone on the offensive, crossed the Potomac river, and was poised to invade the North. It was at this point that Lincoln, as was his habit, began trying to work this problem out on paper, and what he came up with was a series of private notes that sounded like a combination of theology and geometry. "The will of God prevails," he wrote, as though he was stating an axiom. (And surely, if God really *is* God, his will *must* prevail, or else he would not be God.) In this war, both sides claim "to act in accordance with the will of God." But neither has exactly achieved what would surely be the result—victory—that having the will of God on their side would produce. After all, God, "by his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants...could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest." But he had not only evidently willed that war should begin, but that it should "proceed in a direction that neither side had anticipated." That, for Lincoln, was proof enough that God's "purpose is something different from the purpose of either party," something new that neither side had planned. And the unavoidable conclusion he had to draw from that was that the unplanned-for result must be the emancipation of the slaves.²⁷

Lincoln concluded that God's "purpose is something different from the purpose of either party," something new that neither side had planned

But thinking in this fashion also held another message for Lincoln, and that was that God was not merely a remote force or a faceless universal power, but a personal, intelligent, and willing God who intervened in the affairs of men to direct them in ways that they could not even begin to imagine. Three weeks later, after Lee's army had been brought to battle at Antietam and driven back across the Potomac, Lincoln gave this realization an even sharper point when he laid before his Cabinet the text of an Emancipation Proclamation, which, by virtue of his war powers as commander in chief, would free every slave in Rebel hands. Once the Rebels invaded Maryland, he explained to his assembled Cabinet Secretaries, "I deter-

²⁷Lincoln, "Meditation on the Divine Will" (September 2, 1862), in *Collected Works*, 5:403.

mined, as soon as it should be driven out of Maryland, to issue a Proclamation of Emancipation.” And he had done so on the strength of a “promise” he had made “to myself, and—(hesitating a little)—to my Maker. The rebel army is now driven out, and I am going to fulfil that promise.”²⁸ To the hard-bitten political veterans of his Cabinet, nothing could have been more utterly surprising than to listen to a President announce that he was about to make the most important policy decision of his administration—and perhaps American history—on the strength of communications with the Almighty. But there it was: “God had decided this question in favor of the slaves. He was satisfied it was right” and “was confirmed and strengthened in his action by the vow and the results.”²⁹

Lincoln's sense that God had moved in directions that could not easily be discerned, but which he was obliged to follow, surfaced again and again in his letters and speeches over the remaining two-and-a-half years of his life, and never more so than in the inaugural address he delivered after his reelection in 1864. Take the inaugural addresses of the previous fifteen presidents together, and they contain little beyond the vaguest clichés about God blessing America. Not Lincoln's. His Second Inaugural Address was almost a theological meditation on the nature of justice, and how justice was a quality that God reserved to himself to measure. “American Slavery,” he said, is an offense for which all Americans—North and South alike—stood in some measure guilty; and if he chooses to punish both sides for their complicity in slavery, and “gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?” In the face of a guilt in which all had sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God, the only appropriate behavior for victors and vanquished alike was to conduct themselves with humility and repentance:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.³⁰

We were all under the judgment of God—not just under the obligations of natural law, but under God.

None of this, it has to be said, made Lincoln a Christian, although many well-intentioned people after his death would invent well-intentioned stories testifying that Lincoln had been converted, or planned to join a church, or confessed

²⁸Salmon Chase, diary entry for September 22, in *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase*, ed. David H. Donald (New York: Longmans, Green, 1954) 150.

²⁹Gideon Welles, diary entry for September 22, 1862, in *Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson*, ed. John T. Morse, 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911) 1:143.

³⁰Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address” (March 4, 1865), in *Collected Works*, 8:332.

some private Christianity. The problem is that Christianity is not quiet; and the stubborn fact is that Lincoln never did join a church or make any kind of profession. His God was more the God of the Old Testament—a judge—than that of a New Testament redeemer. But if this did not make him a Christian, it did make him a good deal more than an infidel. There was a God who intervened in the affairs of men, and this was a God whom he wanted his nation to be under. Being *under God* would bring that nation to some surprising conclusions, especially about justice, mercy, and forgiveness. But surprising conclusions, as Lincoln explained to a political ally a month before his death, were part and parcel of belief in a living God:

Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told; and as whatever of humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford for me to tell it. Yours truly

A. LINCOLN³¹ ⊕

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³¹Lincoln, "To Thurlow Weed" (March 15, 1865), in *Collected Works*, 8:356.